Pioneers of Holistic Education

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The roots of holistic education extend back over two centuries through the ideas of a number of alternative educational movements. Mainstream educational historians consider these dissidents a loose collection of “child-centered” romantics, and not a cohesive philosophical movement. But there is a common thread running through their ideas which is in alignment with the liberal democratic Jeffersonian tradition, welcoming social change for the benefit of human welfare. We will focus on two Unitarians who put forward an alternative educational vision.
In the 1830s America produced its first home-grown movement of radical social criticism, New England Transcendentalism. This was a many-faceted movement that addressed literary, philosophical, religious, and political issues. It was a romantic response to industrialization and a comprehensive critique of American culture itself - a true countercultural movement. Transcendentalism went beyond any economic or political ideology and was a deeply felt yearning for personal wholeness. These young critics claimed that the American worldview, despite its democratic veneer, was not conducive to genuine personal integration or spiritual freedom.
Transcendentalism and A. Bronson Alcott

Father of his better known daughter, Louisa Mae, A. Bronson Alcott was a Transcendentalist, a Unitarian, and a radical educator. He believed that the teacher’s job was “awakening, invigorating, directing, rather than forcing a child’s faculties upon prescribed and exclusive courses of thought.” He was intuitively sensitive to children’s learning styles, encouraging imagination and self-expression, and teaching through conversations, journal writing and physical activities. His innovations included comfortable desks, slates, and real objects to handle and count.

A. Bronson Alcott (1799-1888)
Transcendentalism and A. Bronson Alcott

The children enjoyed Alcott’s school so much that they visited him in the evenings for tutoring and storytelling. The parents were alarmed. Alcott’s respect for the child was contrary to the prevailing Calvinist belief in innate depravity. School was supposed to involve discipline and “book larnin,” not as Alcott proclaimed, “the production, and original exercise of thought.” In several different towns, parents were so shocked at Alcott’s teaching methods that they would force his school to close.

Image by Orchard House
Transcendentalism and A. Bronson Alcott

In 1847 at a Teachers’ Institute held by education reformer and Unitarian Horace Mann, Alcott was not allowed to present because his political opinions were seen as hostile to the existence of the state. Transcendentalism as a whole failed as a radical reform movement. By the end of the 1840s, America would become preoccupied with slavery and the Civil War and would enter a “Gilded Age” of industrial capitalism.
The Anarchists

Francisco Ferrer was a well-known figure in the Spanish radical movement, who was ultimately convicted (on questionable evidence) of inciting destructive riots and was put to death. From 1901 to 1906 he ran the “Modern School” in Barcelona, until it was closed by authorities. Thereafter he wrote on the anarchist-rationalist theory of education. He drew upon a libertarian educational tradition with its roots in Rousseau, Tolstoy, British anarchist William Godwin, and French and Spanish anarchist educators.

Francisco Ferrer (1859-1909)
Ferrer and other anarchist educators sought to educate the whole person as a means of eliminating personal distinctions based on social class. They deeply opposed the culture of professionalism and believed that all people should be educated for productive work as well as critical thinking. Ferrer’s Modern School sought to integrate working-class and middle-class children and also opposed social distinctions based on gender. The Modern School was co-educational, a shocking innovation in its time and place.
Ferrer’s work did find a small audience in the U.S. among anarchist activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman; artists and writers such as Jack London, Upton Sinclair and Eugene O’Neill; and social reformers like Margaret Sanger and Clarence Darrow. In 1910, members of this radical circle formed the Francisco Ferrer Association, and in 1911 opened a school in New York City based on Ferrer’s model.
During and after World War I, anarchist and radical labor leaders were rounded up in the Red Scare, and either imprisoned or deported. But even had the movement endured, there was no hope for its success in American culture. The Ferrer school and twenty other “modern” schools were scattered in various locations, but most lasted only a few years, and all had collapsed by the end of the 1950s. Yet many of their ideas were carried forward by the free school movement of the 1960s.
The Montessori Movement

During the period of social and intellectual ferment before World War I, American educators encountered the work of Maria Montessori. After an initial bit of interest between 1909 and 1915, the Montessori method re-emerged in the 1970s as the most widespread, best organized independent alternative movement in American education. Montessori was one of the premier theorists of the holistic philosophy, yet unlike other holistic approaches, her method has been welcomed in middle class communities. Today there are approximately 3000 Montessori schools in the U.S.

Maria Montessori
(1870-1952)

Photo: courtesy archives Association Montessori Internationale
Montessori believed that children spontaneously seek growth and learning because that is the spiritual nature of their humanness. Given the proper nurturing, this spiritual force impels the child to unfold their personality, expand their powers, assert their independence, and create an adult identity. What adults regard as misbehavior is caused by their failure to provide the proper environment or by their misguided efforts to direct human unfolding according the their prejudices. In traditional education, “a man has substituted himself for God, desiring to form the minds of children in his own image and likeness; and this cannot be done without subjecting a free creature to torture…”
Montessori believed that liberty and discipline were inextricably linked, that no person could truly be free if they violated the inherent order of their own development. On the one hand, she harshly criticized traditional education that imposes the adults’ will on the child’s embryonic personality. But then she left it up to the adult teacher to evaluate whether the child is properly furthering their own growth. It is interesting to note that this is a classic religious view – one achieves freedom only through a certain discipline. Montessori was a devout Catholic, not a romantic libertarian.
The Montessori Movement

By the 1950s, Montessori would become popular again and considered worthy of another look by Americans because of the space race with the Soviet Union. Once again, it was the efficient and accelerated learning achieved by her approach that caught the interest of middle class Americans. Yet Montessori had not been concerned with the “output” of the child. To use her method as a shortcut to academic success, or as a tool for efficiency or national prestige, is to adopt the letter of her approach without its holistic spirit. The revival of her method is due more to its academic results than to its holistic foundations.
The Waldorf Schools

Another pioneering educator, whose ideas are far less familiar than Montessori’s but in many respects more deeply challenging, was the Austrian thinker Rudolf Steiner. He wrote and lectured on an astounding variety of subjects, including theology, history, psychology, political theory, agriculture, medicine, and education. His insights came from two sources: he was a scientist and philosopher, thoroughly versed in the scholarly literature of his time, and he was a mystic. Any understanding of his ideas must take both sources into account.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)
The Waldorf Schools

In 1919 he was asked by one of his followers, the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, to start an adult education program for employees and then a school for their children. The Waldorf School was the prototype for a worldwide movement which today includes over 400 schools in over twenty countries, including over a hundred in the U.S. - with the number growing. In some ways this is probably the most radically holistic approach ever attempted.
The Waldorf Schools

Waldorf education is based on the spiritual unfolding of the individual. Steiner asserted that “education should never work against a person’s destiny, but should achieve the full development of his own predispositions...the fullest clarity of thought, the most loving deepening of his feelings, and the greatest possible energy and ability of will.” The individual must not be hindered by the materialist values of social institutions. The cultural/spiritual realm of life, which includes arts, literature, law, and education, “should unfold freely and independently alongside the other realms of politics and economics.”
In Waldorf schools there is little use of hierarchical, authoritarian decision making or professional aloofness. Waldorf educators integrate personal and professional development, for they follow Steiner’s belief that who they are is what they teach. They teach out of love for children and their spiritual unfolding, not as paid employees of large impersonal institutions. Of course, many public school teachers are sincerely devoted to their work, but the structure of the system tends to frustrate rather than encourage such devotion.
Rudolf Steiner’s worldview is a powerful critique of mainstream American culture. The deepest problem with Western civilization is that it honors economic, technological, and intellectual dimensions of experience while discrediting the mythological, transcendent, and spiritual. The fundamental conflict is between a social discipline, imposed by those with economic and political power which aims at economic advancement and national glory, and a spiritual unfolding from within each individual, which aspires toward personal wholeness and planetary peace.
John Dewey and Progressive Education

Unitarian John Dewey has been recognized as the major liberal social philosopher of the 20th century, believing that unquestioning allegiance to traditional beliefs and institutions is futile. Cultures must change, and the only issue is whether the change will be violently induced or intelligently directed. Democracy is the best type of social order because it allows for intelligent inquiry and reconstruction. True democracy encourages citizens to take an active role in addressing social problems and avoids the extreme concentration of economic and political power and mass indoctrination that characterize totalitarian societies.
John Dewey and Progressive Education

Dewey and other progressive educators challenged the traditional American culture:

• Believing in a positive conception of human nature, rather than Calvinist pessimism

• Opposing the mental testing movement breaking the child down into separate skills and separate habits rather than looking at the “whole” child

• Supporting an ideal of democracy far more liberal than mainstream American ideology, giving students greater responsibility for their own learning

• Recognizing rabid nationalism as a potential enemy of both individual expression and social reconstruction

• Objecting to industrial capitalism which fosters a selfish competitiveness, rewarding the successful with a disproportionate share of wealth and power
John Dewey and Progressive Education

The liberal, holistic progressive education was thoroughly diluted before finding its way into the educational mainstream. Cosmetic changes, such as portable rather than fixed seating in classrooms, are about as near to progressive reform as most public schools have ventured. To conceive of the school as a laboratory where individuals explore their lives’ possibilities, or where society experiments with new values, would entail sweeping changes in the philosophy, curriculum, methods, and administration of public schools. With the brief exception of the “education crisis” in the early 1970s, American schools have yet to see such changes.